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## THE INTERNATIONAL CLASS STRUGGLE

by

Reinhold Niebuhr

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# THE INTERNATIONAL CLASS STRUGGLE

By Reinhold Niebuhr

The hegemonic position of the United States in the community of nations would have been morally precarious, even if an international class war had not intervened to aggravate the difficulties. It is not easy, as we have seen, for an adolescent nation, with illusions of childlike innocency to come to terms with the responsibilities and hazards of global politics in an atomic age.

But all these perplexities have been heightened by the fact that a class war, originally designed for industrial society and aborted there, has become the dominant pattern of international relations. This development is partly due to the fact that Russia is at once a great center of power and the holy land of a world-wide revolutionary religion. But this fact alone would not have created the hazardous situation which confronts us, if this revolutionary religion had not taken root among the poor peoples of non-industrial nations, particularly in Asia, and if the portents were not so favourable for its continued expansion there. The fact is that an ideology designed for what Toynbee defined as the "internal proletariat" has been able to recoup its defeats in the healthy industrial nations by becoming a remarkably "live option" for the "external proletariat," the poverty-stricken peoples of traditional agrarian economics.

In this situation the hegemony of America in the community of the free world creates some curious moral hazards. We are ironically held responsible for disparities in wealth and well-being which are chiefly due to differences in standards of productivity. But they lend themselves with a remarkable degree of plausibility to the Marxist indictment, which attributes all such differences to exploitation. Thus, every effort we make to prove the virtue of our "way of life" by calling attention to our prosperity is used by our enemies and detractors as proof of our guilt. Our experience of an ironic guilt when we pretend to be innocent is thus balanced by the irony of an alleged guilt when we are comparatively innocent. We find these charges against us difficult to understand because we are the most consistently bourgeois nation on earth. We are, therefore, not fully conversant with the ethos in which the resentments of communism are generated.

While the dynamism of industrial civilization at first heightened the feudal inequalities of privilege, it ultimately introduced complexities and fluidities into the class structure which alleviated the hopelessness and desperation of the poor. Thus it tended to make the orthodox Marxist interpretation of their lot implausible and irrelevant. Marxism has been most successful in those industrial nations of the West in which the realities of industrial society did not efface the older feudal class structure. It has been least successful among us, who had no feudal past; or destroyed the remnant we had in our civil war. Significantly, the only western European nations in which communism is now a living creed, Italy and France, are those in which the historical dynamism of modern industrialism has never shattered the traditional feudal ethos. In France, where feudalism was ostensibly broken by the classic bourgeois revolution, the bourgeoisie adopted the restrictive and undynamic social attitudes of the older feudalism and created a society in which the middle classes make no great efforts to increase productivity and fight desperately to prevent the working classes from gaining a larger share of productive wealth.

Since Marxism interprets political institutions in purely cynical terms, regarding all government as merely the "executive committee" of the privileged classes, therefore wherever democratic government has the power and the will to regulate economic forces for the sake of the general welfare, a good part of the Marxist indictment becomes otiose.

If those European nations, in which feudal and capitalistic injustices are compounded, are most receptive to the communist seeds, it cannot be surprising that the communist creed has become an even more attractive option for the desperate peoples of impoverished agrarian-feudal economies in the whole non-industrial world. It has thus become the standard of revolt of the non-industrial against the industrial world, though such a revolt was originally considered possible only after capitalism had raised the injustices of the feudal world to such a pitch that the final climactic struggle between good and evil in history could take place. That this religious apocalypse, designed for industrial society, should be regarded as relevant for a non-industrial society, is partly the achievement of Lenin. He reinterpreted the sacred texts of Marxism to achieve this result. Through his shrewdness the Marxist revolution gained its first success in the semi-Asiatic, and almost wholly agrarian, culture of Russia. It is spreading from there into Asia and into the whole non-industrial world.

But no degree of reinterpretation of texts could have accomplished this result if the social and cultural forces in the non-industrial world had not been propitious. It is, therefore, necessary to enumerate and define some of these forces and factors.

The primary cause of the resentments which generate revolt in the non-industrial world is the fact that the first impact of a technical society upon a non-technical one was exploitative. The resentments created by this impact of "imperialism" and "colonialism" remain operative, even in a period in which the fading strength of the colonial powers has led to the emancipation of millions upon millions of former colonial peoples. The economic consequences of imperialism were certainly not as unambiguously evil as the Marxist propaganda claims; for it introduced technical skills and education to the agrarian world. Perhaps the most deleterious consequences of imperialism are in the spiritual rather than the economic realm. For arrogance is the inevitable consequence of the relation of power to weakness. In this case the arrogance of power reinforced ethnic prejudices; for the industrial world was "white" and the non-technical world was "coloured".

Ironically our own nation, which has become the residuary legatee of these resentments, was not in the forefront of the imperial venture. Our economic base was so vast and self-sufficient as to obviate significant imperial ventures. Our economic power produced a great deal of covert imperialism. But we did not seek to govern other peoples politically. This fact makes some of the communist propaganda against us singularly irrelevant, as, for instance, the charge of the Chinese foreign minister that we are fighting in Korea in order to gain control of "markets" there for our capitalists.

Imperialism is a perennial problem of human existence; for powerful nations and individuals inevitably tend to use the weak as instruments of their purposes. If the ambitions of the powerful are not purely exploitative, as they frequently are not, they are nevertheless never as purely paternal as they pretend. The Marxist theory, by identifying this imperialist tendency with the capitalist system, enables a new type of imperialism to relate itself to the weakness of the non-industrial world, under the cover of an ostensibly

pure benevolence. In theory Russian politics are the expression of solidarity between the sacred center of a political religion and its various mission fields. Thus the Marxist channeling of the resentments of the recently emancipated, or not yet fully emancipated, colonial peoples not only accentuates the primary animus of their rebellion but also, ironically, predisposes them to court enslavement to a new master, under the illusion that he is an emancipator.

The second reason for the rebellion of the non-industrial world is the plight of the poor in the non-technical world. This poverty has hardly been alleviated by political emancipation. Sometimes it has been aggravated by the social and political confusion consequent upon emancipation. This poverty has two sources: (a) feudal injustice and (b) the low productivity of agrarian economies. These economies have in many instances not reached the level of efficiency which European economies enjoyed before the Industrial Revolution.

All recently emancipated nations suffer from more grievous economic ills than the evils of political tutelage from which they revolted. Landlordism and usurious interest rates have been the engines of injustices in traditional cultures since the earliest agrarian civilizations of Egypt and Babylon. While China, the one traditional nation with a large number of freeholds, suffered less from landlordism, the corruptions of a vast bureaucracy produced analogous injustices. It is not at all certain that India, despite its democratic constitution and the idealism of its leaders, will be able to overcome the injustices of its feudal order in time to stave off a powerful communist movement. Certainly the communist revolution in China gained its success because the previous regime could not establish tolerable justice or order. The whole Middle East is, moreover, in serious plight. For there a decadent Mohammedan feudal order is visibly disintegrating. The relation of western capitalism to these traditional feudal systems of the agrarian world is, of course, not guiltless. Sometimes, as in Indo-China, strategic necessities in our conflict with communism forced us into alliance with a discredited French colonialism. In other cases, however, as in Indonesia, we may well have acted more precipitately in favour of independence than was wise. In any case, the whole of the West, and more particularly the American hegemonic power, is held responsible for the post-imperial ills of the non-technical cultures far beyond our deserts. One of the real spiritual evils of imperialism is that it obsesses a nation held in tutelage with the idea that all of its ills flow from the imperial occupation. This is never the case, particularly not if the colonial nation is deficient in capacities for self-government so that political confusion and economic chaos follow upon emancipation. But frustrated hopes combine easily with communist propaganda to hold the western nations as responsible for the ills which follow upon emancipation as for those which preceded it.

Moreover, few of the non-industrial nations have sufficiently high standards of honesty to make democratic government viable. Corruption in their bureaucracies may be a more potent source of injustice than the economic system. Their low standards of honesty may have many roots. One of them certainly is that the great traditional cultures of the Orient never inculcated an individual sense of responsibility to the larger community. They combined very refined cultures with very low forms of social integration, the village and the family remaining the only communities of significant loyalty. Dishonesty in the Orient, therefore, usually means that any action advantageous to the agent's family is morally justified. The resulting corruption of government seems to make the Marxist cynical interpretation of politics remarkably relevant.

However, even the most grievous injustices of the feudal world are not as responsible for the abject poverty of its agrarian poor as the low efficiency of its economy. Moreover, when industry is introduced, its first effect is, as it was in Occidental nations, to heighten the injustices. Liberal opinion in the western world rightly stresses the necessity for technical assistance in raising the productivity of the whole non-industrial world. But it usually does not recognize that, even if every form of exploitation is avoided in this development, it is not possible to transmute an agrarian culture into a technical civilization without vast cultural and social dislocations. To counter the force of communism in the agrarian world we are under the necessity of telescoping developments which required four centuries in European history.

Meanwhile the difference between our wealth and the poverty of the technically undeveloped world is interpreted by communist propaganda as irrefutable evidence of the exploitative character of our economy. We sometimes naïvely contribute to the effectiveness of this propaganda by unduly stressing the height of our standard of living as proof of our social virtues. Our propaganda is all the more ineffective because the standards of living of a highly industrialized nation are so improbable to the imagination of impoverished peasants of the Orient, that they cannot impress their social and political attitudes.*

The net effect of all these aberrations is that the hegemonic power of the non-communist world becomes the symbol of every past and present injustice. It is held responsible for every ill inhering in the whole historic situation. The indictment against us achieves the greater plausibility because the facts are interpreted through a Marxist ideology. According to this ideology, poverty is caused solely by exploitation. Such an explanation is no more true than the contrasting bourgeois belief that distinctions of poverty and wealth are due primarily to differences of skill, thrift and industry. The truth about poverty and wealth is not fully disclosed by either theory. But the Marxist theory has the advantage of satisfying a deep instinct in the human heart. It places the blame for an unfortunate situation entirely upon others.

Applied to the social realities of a particular national economy it actually comes nearer to the truth, but achieves less political relevance, than when applied to distinctions of poverty and wealth between nations. A national community is sufficiently integral to achieve fairly equal standards of productive efficiency and also to work toward the equalization of unequal privileges by various political strategies. Great disparities of wealth and poverty in a national community, therefore, rightly arouse moral resentment. But since this moral resentment can be effectively channeled into political action in healthy modern societies, the Marxist indictment loses its force in them. But differences in the living standards of various nations are due primarily to disparities in natural resources and in productive efficiency. The disparities in technical efficiency have profound historical roots which cannot be overcome in a decade or even a century. The Marxist interpretation of inequalities between nations is, therefore, more untrue than its interpretation

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*Even non-communist socialism is capable of regarding differences in standards of productivity as prima facie evidence of exploitation. In the recent propaganda pamphlet of the Bevanites of the British Labour Party, "One Way Only", these differences are presented as convincing proof of nefarious elements in our politics.

of such inequalities within a particular nation. But since the inequalities between highly industrialized nations and low-grade agrarian economies are greater than those within any particular nation, the Marxist theory is politically more appealing, though less true, when applied internationally. Thus Marxist political illusions have achieved a higher degree of plausibility in the "class struggle" between nations than they achieved in domestic politics. Therefore we confront the ironic situation in world politics that the most powerful and technically the most efficient modern nation is condemned in a court of public opinion, strongly influenced by Marxist dogma, not so much for its real sins as for achievements in which it takes an inordinate pride. This is one of many reasons why we must not expect to gain a quick or easy victory over communism in the impoverished agrarian world.

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There are cultural, as well as socio-economic, causes for the remarkable appeal of communism to the agrarian world. The ancient cultures of Asia, whether humanistic, as the Confucianism of China, or mystic as the religions of India, have one common characteristic. They lack historical dynamism. It would be impossible in brief terms to do justice to the various roots of the western historical dynamism as found in the Hebraic faith, in Greek humanism and in the Christian religion. This historical dynamism is partly an attitude toward the whole drama of history, involving a sense of expectancy that something significantly new and meaningful will occur in the future. It is partly derived from an attitude toward nature. This involves a belief that man is to have dominion over nature, which is assumed in Biblical faith and which stands in contrast to a pious awe before nature in Oriental pantheism. It also implies both the idea of the rationality of nature, which the western tradition draws from Greek thought, and the equally necessary idea of contingency in nature, which is drawn from the Christian idea of Creation. These two ideas together furnish the basis for modern science and the scientific "exploitation" of nature. "The method of Galilean science", declares Mr. Michael Foster, ". . . presupposes (a) that it is impossible that nature should not embody a mathematically intelligible scheme and exhibit laws mathematically definable; but (b) that which of the possible alternative schemes it embodies and which of the several laws equally definable it exhibits can be decided only by observation and experiment."*

The one idea lays the foundation for the deductive, and the other for the inductive, methods of science. These two together account for the remarkable achievements of western science. They are distinguished from the indifference toward problems of nature in Confucian humanism and the mystic reverence of nature in Hindu pantheism in which reverence both the rationality and the contingency of natural events are obscured.

In any event the cultures of the Orient are sleeping-waking cultures in which the drama of human history is not taken seriously and in which nature is either deified or reduced to a realm of illusion. Communism is a historically dynamic religion which comes to the hopeless people of the Orient as the harbinger of a great hope. They have been exposed to the culture of the West; but have found the various western cultural and religious exports contradictory. There seemed to be a clear contradiction between the Christian

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*Michael Foster in Mind, Vol. xiv, p. 24 (1936). See also John Baillie, Natural Science and the Spiritual Life.

faith, as expounded by the Christian missionary enterprise, and the cult of science as acquired by Oriental students in the academic centers of the West. There seemed also to be a contradiction between the imperial impulses exhibited by western power and the idealism propounded by western religion. There was furthermore no clear political program in western cultural exports. Christianity is reluctant to identify its piety with any particular political program for the very reasons which make such an identification so dangerous in communism. As politics deals with the proximate ends of life, and religion with ultimate ones, it is always a source of illusion if the one is simply invested with the sanctity of the other.

Communism has a tremendous original advantage as a destructive force in the dying sleeping cultures of the Orient because it is not only historically dynamic but it also seems to combine all the impulses of historical dynamism, which so frequently stand in contradiction, into one single unified impulse. This unification is spurious and dangerous; but this fact adds to, rather than detracts from, its striking power. Religion and science are combined in such a way that the modern cult of science is brought completely into the service of an existential faith. "Marxist-Leninist" science has proved to have a great attractive power in the universities of China. And even in India the intellectuals, without political pressure upon them, take its pretensions seriously.

The Marxist "science" does have one advantage over bourgeois social science The latter usually gives itself to the illusion that reasoning about historical events can be presuppositionless and can achieve the disinterested character of the natural sciences. Yet all thought about human life and destiny and about the problems of man's common existence are "existential" in the sense that they begin and end with presuppositions of faith which are not determined by scientific inquiry. They begin with the interests of the self and they end with some concept of ultimate meaning, some hope or faith in what life is or should be. The communist faith is not only explicitly "existential" as bourgeois science is not. It also provides for an identification of the beginning and the end of the reasoning process which is particularly dear to the human heart. It seeks to prove that the interests of a particular historical force (in this case of the proletariat) are the unqualified instruments of the ultimate. The poor, in communist apocalypse, cannot emancipate themselves from the injustices from which they suffer without emancipating the whole of mankind from all evil. This formulation has proved tremendously attractive to both intellectuals and to industrial workers in some portions of the western world; and it is bound to have an even greater persuasive power in the non-technical societies.

To assign a Messianic function in history to the poor not only seems to transmute their resentments into vehicles of the ultimate good; but it also eases the uneasy conscience of those who are affronted by social injustice. As a religion this faith generates what in Christian terms is regarded as the very essence of sin. It identifies the interests of a particular self or of a particular force in history with the final purposes of the God of history. God, in this case, is of course the dialectic which gives meaning to the whole. Such a faith also has an advantage over a cynical creed, such as Nazism. It does not demand that a particular force or interest in history defy every common standard of justice and right in the name of its own ambitions. In theory it defies these standards only provisionally. Ultimately, according to this creed, the ruthless battle of the proletariat against all other forces in history allegedly leads to the triumph of universal justice.

For good measure communism couches this religion in the language of "science" and thus comes to a world, tired of defeatist religions, as an emancipating force. Moreover, this science also promises the technical conquest of nature. This final pretension has no force in the western world since technical achievements are obviously prior to the proclamation of the communist apocalypse. Russian propagandists do indeed seek to prove that their technical inventions have in most cases anticipated ours. But outside of Russia the facts are too obvious to give these pretensions any force, even among prospective devotees.

Thus, every aspect of the cultural crisis in the sleeping cultures of the Orient combines with the socio-historic tension between poor and rich nations to give this spurious religion a tremendous plausibility and attractive power. This ironic situation is heightened by the fact that the ethos in our technical and democratic world, more particularly in the highly favoured American nation, is so different from that of the world in which these illusions arise that it is difficult for us to appreciate their force in the impoverished world. Our difficulties are heightened by a widespread tendency in western social science to seek the comprehension of the social and political phenomena of our era in dimensions bordering upon the purely biological. We confront manias and confusions in the world, at enmity with us, which certainly lead to very stubborn forms of "aggressiveness". But this aggressiveness is compounded of spiritual, historical, social and cultural forces which cannot be measured by our computations taken from biology. We are in danger, therefore, of facing the international "class struggle" with an uncomprehending fury or complete dismay.

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The attractive power of communism in the impoverished world is heightened by the lack of receptivity in this world for almost every facet of what we know as democracy. Democracy in the West is both a political system and a way of life. It requires a high degree of literacy among its citizens, a sense of the dignity of the individual but also a sense of his responsibility to a wider community than his family. The bourgeois versions of the concept of the dignity of the individual are frequently defective. Sometimes they unduly subordinate the sense of community to the idea of the worth of the individual; sometimes they illicitly identify the dignity with the virtue of the individual. Therefore our preaching of democracy frequently seems highly irrelevant to broken or partially reconstructed communities who are desperately seeking for a viable structure for their common life.

But even without these particular defects, democracy in its most ideal formulation is not as immediately relevant to the ancient cultures of the East or to the primitive cultures of Africa as is generally supposed. Some of both the spiritual and the socio-economic presuppositions for it are lacking. Spiritually the Orient is informed by religions which are either mystic and pantheistic such as Buddhism and Hinduism; or humanistic and collectivist such as the Confucianism of China or the Shintoism of Japan. Pantheistic religions can find no significance for the individual in the integral unity of his spiritual and physical life. The purpose of religious redemption is the annulment of individual existence and its invorporation into a divine unity. It is a far cry from this kind of mysticism to the sober, earthbound humanism of Confucianism. There are no greater differences between East and West than between the humanism of China and the mysticism of India. But Chinese humanism does not, for this reason, offer the individual a more significant place in the scheme of things. His life is oriented to the family. All social

relations and moral ideals (Confucius' "Five Relations") are derived from the family. Japan was able to achieve a more solid national cohesion because Shintoism establishes the whole nation as a kind of large family, related to a divine ancestor. But in either case the individual does not arrive at a position of independence from the group. In Confucianism the group to which the life of the individual is oriented remains the family, through all the vicissitudes of a rich cultural history. Therefore the national cohesion always remained precarious and unstable.

There is thus no spiritual basis in the Orient for what we know as the "dignity of the individual". This is one reason why there is little prospect in China for heroic resistance to totalitarianism, when once established. Much was made, before communism triumphed in China, of the alleged power of Confucianism to absorb every cultural force which may gain a provisional triumph over it. But since communism has triumphed in China we hear less of this alleged stubborn vitality of Confucianism. Its lack of historical dynamism makes it an easy prey to communism, particularly among the youth; and the lack of individual independence and the strong emphasis upon prudential rather then heroic virtue, predisposes even opponents of communism to bow to its power. The mystic religions of the Orient will hardly prove more capable of offering spiritual resistance to the demonic dynamism of the communist movement.

A democratic society requires some capacity of the individual both to defy social authority on occasion when its standards violate his conscience and to relate himself to larger and larger communities than the primary family group. The highly developed individual self-consciousness in the western Christian tradition is supported by a long spiritual history. Yet, even in the West, it did not come to a full flower until the developments of a commercial and industrial civilization broke the organic forms of western feudalism. The complex and multiple communities of modern society involved the individual in both complementary and contradictory loyalties and thus created a new degree of individual independence. At the same time technical developments increased the possibility of communications so that the broader community would be held together not merely by political authority but by spiritual and cultural cohesions. The varied skills of technical society and its more mobile and flexible forms of property also emancipated the individual from the restraints of hereditary property and vocation.

A democratic society, in short, requires not only a spiritual and cultural basis which is lacking in the Orient but a socio-economic foundation which primitive and traditional civilizations cannot quickly acquire. Many of the values of democratic society which are most highly prized in the West are, therefore, neither understood not desired outside of the orbit of western society. Resentment against feudal injustice easily prompts the youth of decaying feudal societies to espouse the cause of a new collectivist culture, which promises justice. They do not understand the tyrannical consequences of this new form of totalitarianism. But even if they did understand, they cannot be expected to feel the loss of liberty with the same sense of grievous deprivation as in the West.

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If we consider both the cultural and the socio-economic hazards to any immediate success of democracy in the non-technical world and rightly gauge the causes for the attractive power of communism in this world, we are driven to the conclusion that we must face the menace of the spread of tyranny in the non-industrial world for many decades to come. We will not, of course, fail

to take the strategic and military measures which are possible and necessary to arrest its growth. But we will avoid the hysteria which arises from the mistaken belief that this growth is due merely to some political or strategic miscalculation by this or that government agency or administration. Fortunately the non-industrial world lacks the technical resources to offer a mortal challenge to our security. Fortunately, also, there are genuine spiritual and moral affinities between ourselves and Japan and the Philippines, which will make it possible to hold the "island littoral" in the Pacific, though the danger of communist infiltration into even these Asian cultures must not be obscured.

But these tactical and strategic measures and possibilities must not make us oblivious to the larger pattern of history. In that larger pattern we face a revolt of impoverished peoples of the world against the centers of technical power in which justified and unjustified resentments are so curiously mingled, and legitimate desires far greater well-being are so inextricably intertwined with illusory hopes that decades upon decades will be required to bring order out of this chaos. There is no wisdom in the constant iterations of slogans in which liberty is contrasted with tyranny; and in which this tyranny is so defined that the utopian illusions, which nourish it, are obscured. Communism is not merely another version of Nazism. Nazism was a morally cynical creed which defied every norm of justice. It represented a moral nihilism which could have developed only in the decay of a highly developed and sophisticated civilization. Communism is a morally utopian creed which has a much wider appeal than Nazism because it speaks in the name of justice rather than in defiance of justice; and it is ostensibly devoted to the establishment of a universal society, rather than to the supremacy of a race or nation. The fact that its illusory hopes are capable of generating cruelties and tyrannies, exceeding even those of a cynical creed, can be understood only if it is realized how much more plausible and dangerous the corruption of the good can be in human history than explicit evil.

The rise of communism in our world is comparable to the rise of Islam and its challenge of Christian civilization in the high Middle Ages. Some of the measures we take against it are informed by the same lack of realism which characterized the Crusades. The Islamic power finally waned. It was destroyed not so much by its foes as by its own inner corruptions. The Sultan of Turkey found it ultimately impossible to support the double role of political head of a nation and the spiritual head of the Islamic world. Stalin has this same double role in the world of communist religion. He or his successors will finally be convicted of insinuating the power impulses of a Russian state into the Messianic illusions of an ostensibly world-wide political religion. If we fully understand the deep springs which feed the illusions of this religion, the nature of the social resentments which nourish them and the realities of life which must ultimately refute them, we might acquire the necessary patience to wait out the long run of history while we take such measures as are necessary to combat the more immediate perils.